



Chile goalkeeper Claudio Bravo is lifted in the air by his teammates after his heroics in the penalty shootout won them the Confederations Cup semifinal against Portugal at the Kazan Arena on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Chile's impressive rise continues

AFP, Kazan



Chile's indestructible team spirit and unyielding attitude have laid the foundations for a hugely successful run that will see them contest a third straight international final at the Confederations Cup.

Claudio Bravo proved Chile's hero on Wednesday as the Manchester City goalkeeper saved all three penalties to eliminate Portugal in a semi-final shootout following a 0-0 draw after extra time in Kazan.

"That was unbelievably stressful," admitted the 34-year-old Bravo, as Chile won 3-0 on penalties to set up a showdown on Sunday with Germany or Mexico.

"This team never gives up, which means we can achieve great things like this."

While Bravo showed nerves of steel, his team-mates transformed iron will into cool composure as Arturo Vidal, Charles Aranguiz and Alexis Sanchez calmly converted their spot-kicks.

With the European champions vanquished, Chile are eager for a potential rematch with world champions Germany as they attempt to add the Confederations Cup trophy to their 2015 and 2016 Copa America titles in Saint Petersburg.

"That was a crazy end, the first penalty is

always the most important," said Vidal, who buried Chile's opening spot-kick just inside the post.

"We fought like crazy and now we hope we can face Germany in the final and also win."

Chile qualified for Russia as South American champions, ahead of powerhouses Argentina and Brazil -- winners of the Confederations Cup in 1997, 2005, 2009 and 2013.

Chile ended a 99-year wait for a maiden Copa America title in 2015, defeating Argentina on penalties, before retaining their crown a year later in a special centenary edition.

The rise of Chile's La Roja has been consistent, and they were unlucky to lose out to 2014 World Cup hosts Brazil on penalties in the last 16 after beating defending champions Spain 2-0 in the group stage.

They shook off that heartbreak to lift the Copa America on home soil in 2015, with Lionel Messi again reduced to tears and briefly announcing his international retirement as Chile downed Argentina following another shootout in 2016, this time in the US.

Forward Eduardo Vargas was the 2016 Copa America's top scorer with six goals, while Alexis Sanchez was voted best player and Bravo was nominated as best goalkeeper.

The back-to-back titles were achieved with roughly the same squad, ensuring it is a group that can draw on the invaluable experience of achieving success on the big stage.

'Anything is possible'

REUTERS, Dusseldorf



The Tour de France has not had a home champion since 1985, but after Romain Bardet's second-placed finish last year there are high hopes that

the wine-loving 26-year-old could be sipping champagne on the Champs Elysees in three weeks' time.

The AG2R-La Mondiale rider is one of the most attack-minded in the peloton and is likely to find this year's route, which Bardet describes as "quite treacherous", to his taste.

With only four summit finishes, it favours long-range attacks and features only two short time trials.

This, he says, could throw the race wide open, but he is certainly not getting carried away about his own chances.

"Anything is possible -- in one way or another," Bardet, who was also sixth overall in 2014, told Reuters.

"I take a very modest approach, I will rely on my strengths and the final placing does not matter."

The Frenchman, who enjoys tasting wines from the Rhone valley and the Languedoc region, has had a difficult start to the season, after being thrown out of the Paris-Nice stage race for taking an illegal tow from a team car.

That forced him to change his schedule and switch focus to the Tour of Catalunya instead. He is adamant, however, that it did not disrupt his preparations.

"It's part of a high-level athlete's life. It actually made me tougher, I challenged myself," he said.

Bardet geared up nicely for the Tour de

France, which runs from July 1-23, by finishing sixth overall in the Criterium du Dauphine earlier this month, showing great form in the mountains after losing ground in the time trial.

Bardet, who is as softly-spoken as he is wildly aggressive on the bike, said the week-long warm-up offered few clues as to how he will get on in the Tour.

"I'm very well and very much looking forward to taking part in my fifth Tour de France. I have been resting and training well since the Dauphine," he said.

"But things can change between June and mid-July."



ROMAIN BARDET

Bardet said his team, with Swiss Mathias Frank, eighth overall on the Tour in 2015, and France's Pierre Latour, who won a Vuelta stage last year, was the strongest he had ever had around him.

He will, however, be deprived of the services of 'domestique de luxe' and long-time friend Mikael Cherel, who suffered a hairline fracture to his pelvis during a training camp.

The duo launched a decisive attack on a wet descent in the Tour last year that put Bardet up to second overall.

Football stars set for Messi's wedding

AFP, Rosario



Football and showbiz stars gather in northern Argentina on Friday for Latin America's celebrity wedding bash of the decade when Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi marries his childhood sweetheart Antonella Rocuzzo.

Pop star Shakira and her husband, Messi's teammate Gerard Pique, are expected among the 260 guests, according to media and locals close to the event.

They will join old friends of the couple and footballers such as his Barcelona strike partners Luis Suarez and Neymar.

The party at a casino in his hometown Rosario will be a respite for the player from his legal woes. A Spanish court last month rejected his appeal against a conviction for tax fraud.

Brunette bride Rocuzzo, 29, will wear a dress by Spanish designer Rosa Clara, which has been flown over from Barcelona.

The designer has dressed stars such as actresses Eva Longoria and Sofia Vergara as well as Spain's Queen Letizia.

From 2200 GMT the guests will pack into the Hotel City-Center Casino, which stands right next to a crime-ridden slum run by drug gangs.

"Messi's wedding accentuates the sense of inequality that is symbolized by the casino in that neighbourhood," said Carlos del Frade, author of several books on the drug trade in Rosario.

This city of 1.2 million people is also a cradle of footballing talent, however.

"Rosario lives and breathes football. That is another reason Lionel feels so comfortable here," the city's mayor, Monica Fein, told AFP.

"I think he is excited that through his wedding his friends (from abroad) will be able to get to know the city he loves so much."

The civil wedding ceremony and party will all take place inside the venue, and the guests will be lodged there too.

Messi, 30 -- considered a man of few words -- has reportedly asked chefs to cook local delicacies such as "locro" stew and "empanada" pasties for the feast.

The star dish is a typical Argentine beef roast including chitterlings, gizards and kidneys.

Uruguayan pop bands Rombai and Marama plus singer Karina, wife of Argentina footballer Sergio Aguero, will perform at the dance.

It is not known whether the guests will also get a song from Shakira, the Colombian diva famous for "Whenever, Wherever."

Some 155 journalists have been

accredited to cover the bash, but have been warned they will have no access to the guests.

Security will be handled by a private team of Israeli specialists used by Messi for all his excursions.

"In Lionel Messi's case, he's widely accepted by the people at all levels," said Diego Manso, a local private security consultant.

"All the same, the security systems will never overlook the probability of a lot of people wanting to approach him, wanting to touch him, take photos with him, from their risk analysis."

Messi and Rocuzzo live in Barcelona where he plays, but still return regularly to Rosario on holiday.

The couple had their two children baptized there last year: Thiago, 4 and one-year-old Mateo, both born in Barcelona.

"It's no surprise that he is coming back here to get married," one of the wedding guests, the player's old school friend Diego Vallejos, told AFP.

"He is an ordinary person who just wants to be near his family and friends. He is a humble person. Money has not changed his personality."

Messi and Rocuzzo met as children. He moved to Spain when he was 13 to join FC Barcelona. But they kept in touch.

"They are the love of each other's lives," says Vallejos.

Karsdorp signs for Roma

AFP, Milan

Dutch international defender Rick Karsdorp joined Serie A runners-up Roma on Wednesday in a five-year deal worth 14 million euros (\$15.9 million) to his former club Feyenoord.

Full-back Karsdorp, 22, arrived in Rome on Tuesday for a medical and after signing his contract on Wednesday said: "Joining Roma is a great move for me."

"I come here with plenty of enthusiasm to play and to hopefully achieve my dreams. I know I have lots of room for improvement but I can't wait to play for this historic club."

Karsdorp won the Dutch Cup with Feyenoord in 2016 and last season helped the Rotterdam club end their 18-year wait for the Dutch league title.

"Roma is delighted to announce the signing from Feyenoord of Rick Karsdorp for a fee of 14 million euros, plus extras up to a maximum of five million euros," the Italian club said in a statement.

Bolt triumphs in last European race

REUTERS, Ostrava



Usain Bolt overcame a slow start to win the 100 metres at the Ostrava Golden Spike meeting on Wednesday as he gears up for a final world championships in London this summer.

In his second 100m outing of his final season, the Jamaican was slow out of the blocks but jumped ahead before the half-way point to finish in a time of 10.06 seconds, just edging Yunier Perez of Cuba, who ran a personal best 10.09 seconds.

Bolt, who has eight Olympic golds and 13 world championship medals, will retire after August's world championships.

The 30-year-old said he was not happy about clocking over 10 seconds for the second straight race, although he remained confident about the remainder of the season.

"I am not happy with the time but I am just getting to my running," he told the sellout crowd after his ninth and final appearance at the meet in the eastern Czech industrial city.

"I have some training to do... But I will be fine."

Bolt has become a regular at the Ostrava meet and his fans showed their appreciation at the end of the night, holding up placards to form the Jamaican flag as Tina Turner's "Simply the Best" played in the stadium.

"The biggest thing is always the crowd... That

is why I keep coming back here. You guys are wonderful. Thanks for everything," Bolt said.

He later told reporters his focus was on staying healthy, including taking care of his back as he gets older. "But I did not get injured, that is key," he was quoted as saying by Czech news website idnes.cz.

With Bolt moving closer to retirement, a number of athletes could be set to emerge from his shadow.

Among them is South African Wayde van Niekerk, who broke the 300m world record earlier in the evening, rubbing Michael Johnson out of the record books for the second time in less than a year.

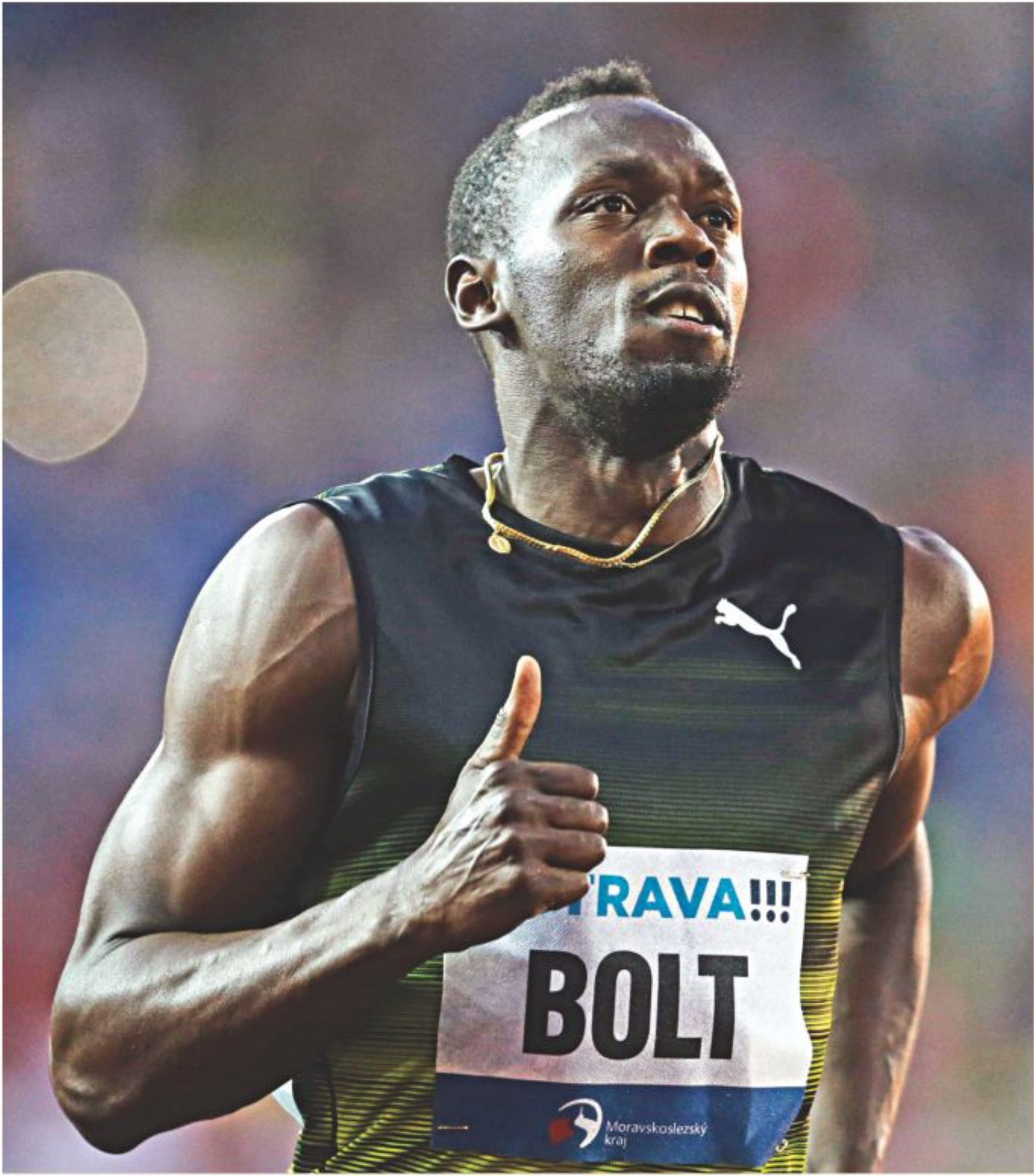
The 24-year-old, who beat Johnson's 400m best at last summer's Rio Olympics, recorded a time of 30.81 seconds in the rarely-run 300m, bettering the American's previous mark of 30.85 seconds set in 2000.

Van Niekerk's time also beat the Ostrava meeting record set by Bolt in 2010.

"I have been improving in each and every one of my events so it is a great step for the year and I am feeling quite confident for the rest of the year," the sprinter, who is expected to run the 200m and 400m at the world championships, told Czech Television.

"I was ready to dig deep and just get used to the feeling of the longer events. I am pleased with today."

Britain's Mo Farah held on to beat Mathew Kimeli of Kenya in the 10,000m with a time of 27 minutes 12.09 seconds.



Jamaican sprint superstar Usain Bolt competes in the IAAF World Challenge Zlata Tretra athletics tournament in Ostrava on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

QUICK SINGLES

The following are a few samples of stories that did not make the print edition. However, if they pique your interest, you can always read them online on The Daily Star website by simply scanning the QR codes listed below:

McEnroe regrets Serena 'No. 700 on men's tour' remark

John McEnroe said Wednesday he would have



been better off never trying to compare Serena Williams to men's tennis players after the furore over his remark that she would rank "like 700 in the world".

Hip problem forces Murray out of Hurlingham

Defending champion Andy Murray's troubled build-up to Wimbledon



continued as he withdrew from playing an exhibition match because of a hip problem.

Mendes denies creating shell companies

Football super-agent Jorge Mendes denied



he helped create shell companies for his clients during questioning by a Spanish court investigating alleged tax evasion by Monaco striker Radamel Falcao.

Veratti is the perfect player for Barca: Ronaldo

PSG and Italian midfielder Marco Veratti's future



remains in the balance. Several media outlets in Spain have claimed that the Italian wants to sign for Barcelona and has made certain gestures to make his intention clear to his present club.

Valbuena joins Fenerbahce

AFP, Istanbul

Mathieu Valbuena, the France international at the centre of an interminable sex-tape scandal, on Thursday signed for Istanbul giants Fenerbahce from Lyon.

"It's with great pride I come to play at Fenerbahce ... I'm going to fight for them to win titles," the 32-year-old told a press conference.

Valbuena signed for two years with an option for a third.